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AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL  
ORGANIZED CRIME

# ORGANIZED CRIME DECLARES WAR

THE ROAD  
TO CHAOS IN  
ECUADOR

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## FROM VISION TO ACTION: A DECADE OF ANALYSIS, DISRUPTION AND RESILIENCE

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime was founded in 2013. Its vision was to mobilize a global strategic approach to tackling organized crime by strengthening political commitment to address the challenge, building the analytical evidence base on organized crime, disrupting criminal economies and developing networks of resilience in affected communities. Ten years on, the threat of organized crime is greater than ever before and it is critical that we continue to take action by building a coordinated global response to meet the challenge.



## A STATE OF ‘INTERNAL ARMED CONFLICT’

**F**or years, Ecuador enjoyed a relative degree of peace, as its neighbours, Colombia and Peru, were wrangling with internal conflicts as chief protagonists in the international supply of cocaine. However, things have changed dramatically in recent times. On 9 January 2024, the recently elected president, Daniel Noboa, said that the country was in a state of ‘internal armed conflict’ against 22 criminal groups that he described as ‘narco-terrorists’<sup>1</sup>

The escalation of violent crime in Ecuador started to make international news in 2020 with the assassination of Alias Rasquiña, the leader of the most powerful criminal group in the country, Los Choneros.<sup>2</sup> This was followed by a series of massacres inside the country’s prisons,<sup>3</sup> a phenomenon that started in 2018 and has continued since. The prison murders are symptomatic of the violent contestation between various organized crime groups and the weak capacity of the Ecuadorian state to control its own infrastructure. One of the most visible incidents of Ecuador’s growing problem with violence occurred in August 2023 when presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio was assassinated at a campaign rally in Quito just weeks before the elections (for our analysis of this murder, see <https://assassination.globalinitiative.net/face/fernando-villavicencio/>).<sup>4</sup> Another thread in the country’s tapestry of crime is political violence, a pattern that can be seen in the assassination of the mayor of the city of Manta in July 2023,<sup>5</sup> and death threats received by the mayor of Duran, who cannot appear in person in the city he runs for fear of his life. Those responsible are also organized crime groups.

Since Villavicencio’s murder, several incidents have occurred, including the arrest of the Colombian hitmen involved in his death and their subsequent murders in a prison, which has deprived the authorities of crucial evidence in the investigation.<sup>6</sup> The year 2023 ended as the most violent recorded in the history of Ecuador as the homicide rate reached 46.5 per 100 000 inhabitants, nine times higher than the figure for 2018, when it was around 5 per 100 000.<sup>7</sup>

In late 2023, the attorney general’s office launched Operation Metastasis, the biggest ever initiative taken against drug trafficking and corruption in the country, in the words of the attorney general, Diana Salazar. The operation included 75 raids, in which 29 judges, former judges, police officers and other figures with connections to organized crime were arrested.<sup>8</sup> The highest-profile detainee is Wilman Terán,<sup>9</sup> president of the Consejo de la Judicatura (judiciary council), a watchdog entity that oversees the country’s justice system. Salazar said publicly that the country could expect violence to flare up as a result of the operation.<sup>10</sup>



Police officers stand guard while supporters of assassinated presidential hopeful Fernando Villavicencio pay their respects. © Rodrigo Buendia/AFP via Getty Images

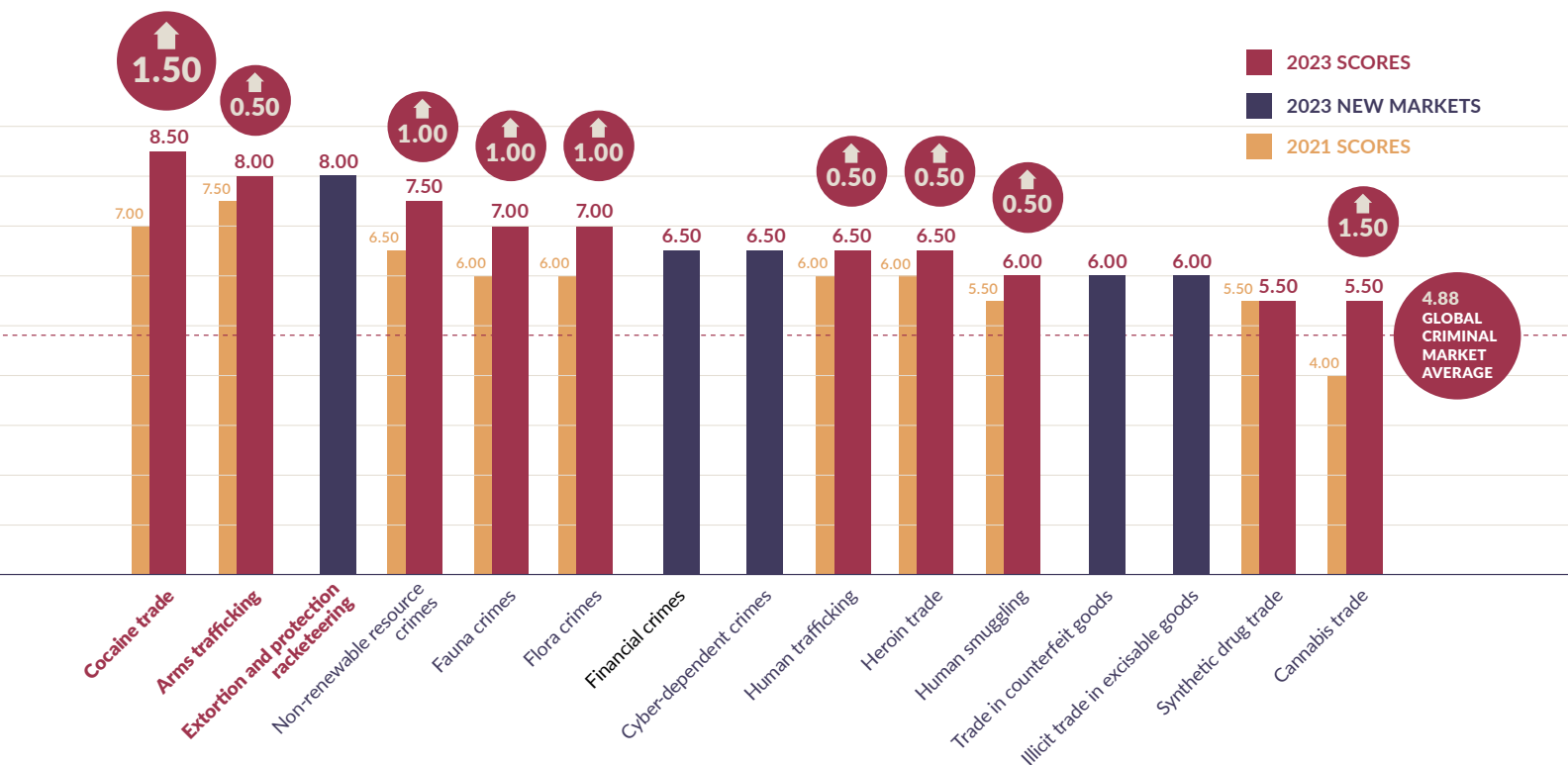
Her words proved prescient. A string of incidents followed. On 3 January 2024, days before the current episode of violence had erupted, Salazar said a gang, Los Lobos ('the wolves'), was trying to kill her,<sup>11</sup> the same gang that is thought to be behind Villavicencio's assassination. On 7 January, Alias 'Fito', the *capo* of Los Choneros, escaped from a maximum security prison where he was serving a 34-year sentence.<sup>12</sup> Simultaneously, six riots broke out in prisons around the country, and later Fabricio Colón Pico, alias El Salvaje, leader of Los Lobos, escaped from a prison.<sup>13</sup>

In response, Noboa, who had recently won an election with a pledge to fight organized crime, declared a state of emergency, imposing a curfew along with other measures to tackle the crisis. Retaliation by criminal organizations came swiftly and brutally, with terror attacks in the capital, Quito, the port city of Guayaquil, and Cuenca, Manta and other towns. In one incident, masked armed man threatened journalists during a live television broadcast in Guayaquil;<sup>14</sup> in another, armed man entered a university.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, car bombs were detonated in several cities and members of the police kidnapped.<sup>16</sup> Organized crime had declared war on the state.

Once again, President Noboa responded. This time his salvo was a presidential decree stating that Ecuador was facing internal armed conflict.<sup>17</sup> The decree identified 22 organized crime groups as 'narco-terrorists' and authorized the military to 'neutralize' them under the principles of international humanitarian law and human rights. At the time of writing, the situation is ongoing.

## The road to the crisis

The situation in Ecuador is complex, and more research into the political-economic factors behind how this once stable country descended into violent, crime-driven chaos needs to be undertaken if we are to fully comprehend the situation. Nevertheless, there are some key features of Ecuador's criminal landscape that we do understand, and which can at least partly explain how the country



**FIGURE 1** Ecuador's criminal markets.

NOTE: The cocaine, arms trafficking, and extortion and protection racketeering markets are ranked as severe.  
 SOURCE: Global Organized Crime Index 2023, GI-TOC, oc.index.com

has arrived at this critical juncture. The existence of at least three intertwined criminal markets, the presence of transnational organized crime groups as well as local criminal networks, and the country's poor resilience capacity to respond to and mitigate the effects of organized crime are all pivotal to understanding the complex criminal ecosystem that has emerged in force in recent years. In the last edition of the Global Organized Crime Index, published in September 2023, scores for Ecuador's criminal markets and criminal actors are revealing.<sup>18</sup>

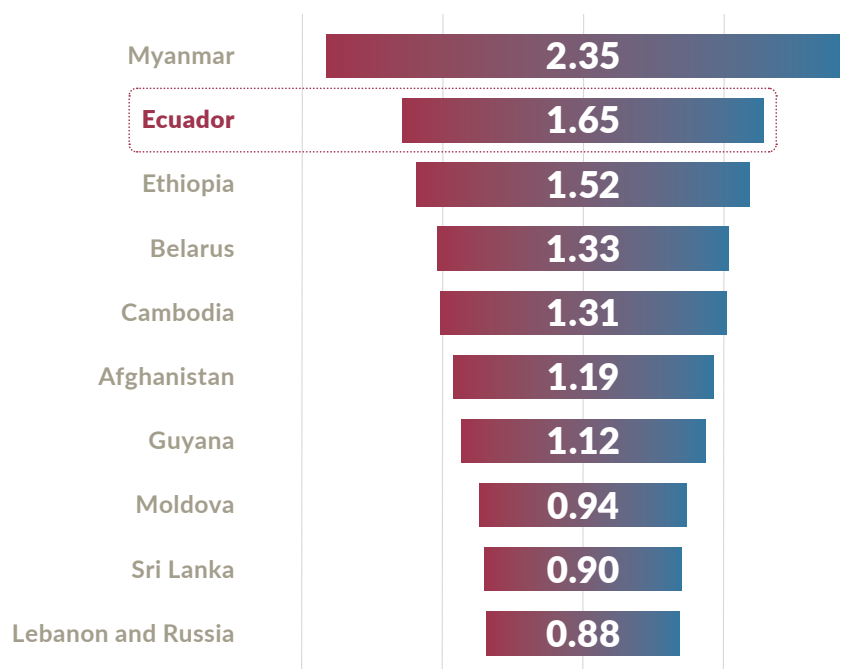
Perhaps most indicative of these is that Ecuador's cocaine market scored a very high 8.5 out of 10 (where 10 is most criminal) in the 2023 Index.<sup>19</sup> According to the Index methodology, this means that the cocaine market exerts a severe influence in the country. Moreover, the cocaine market score has increased by 1.5 on the scale of 1 to 10 since the previous version of the Index (published in 2021), making it the most pervasive criminal market in the country (Figure 1). Evidently, the cocaine market has been on a steep growth trajectory over the past two years, stimulating organized crime activity and its concomitant armed violence associated with inter-gang conflict.

How did Ecuador get to this point? Part of the answer is geography. Sandwiched between Colombia and Peru, the two biggest producers of cocaine in the world, Ecuador has ports that provide a gateway to the Pacific trade corridor, while its infrastructure allows for the convenient transport, storage and distribution of cocaine produced by its neighbours. The country therefore became used as a transit hub in the 2000s to distribute cocaine to end markets in Europe and the US. The cocaine

economy in Ecuador is controlled largely by several foreign actors, including organizations from the Balkans, who have been present in the country for the last 20 years and who coordinate shipments to Europe;<sup>20</sup> Colombian mafias in the form of ex-FARC<sup>21</sup> dissident groups that formed after the 2016 peace agreement and who are involved in cocaine production in areas adjacent to the Ecuadorian border; and, lastly, Mexican cartels who use Ecuador as a transit country for shipping cocaine to the US. In the case of the latter, Ecuador has the advantage of being less heavily controlled by law enforcement than Mexico and Colombia.

In the Organized Crime Index profile for Ecuador, foreign criminal actors are the most pervasive of all actor categories in the country. These foreign actors work with local counterparts to operate different components of the cocaine supply chain. In the Index, the local operators are understood as criminal networks. This is a category of criminal actors that recorded the highest growth since last Index iteration in 2021. This ascendancy might be explained by the loss of power and factionalism seen in the long-dominant criminal group in the country, Los Choneros. The massacres mentioned above were the result of a process of violent internal divisions in Los Choneros that ended their monopoly over the criminal scene, and resulted in the emergence of smaller factions looking for a slice of the cocaine business and other lucrative criminal markets.<sup>22</sup> The criminal network that emerged from this fragmentation is thought to be made up of over 20 constituent groups, labelled as terrorist groups and public enemies by the state.

In addition to providing services to transnational cocaine traffickers, these criminal networks have developed other profitable criminal markets. The power wars between gangs that ensued as Los Choneros fractured created a demand for firearms. This is evident in the arms trafficking market for Ecuador, which also recorded a very high score (8). The dynamics of the arms trafficking market at the same time shifted, from predominantly provision of weapons to Colombian criminal organizations to the supply of weapons to local criminal groups fighting to control their territories and to secure their share of the cocaine trade. Local groups have also formed protection rackets that extort businesses and individuals. The co-existence of these three related criminal markets – the cocaine and firearms



**FIGURE 2** Countries with the widest gap between resilience and criminality rates.

SOURCE: Global Organized Crime Index 2023, GI-TOC, oc.index.com

trade, and extortion and racketeering – largely explain how criminality and violence have become such an acute problem for the small country on the equator in a relatively short space of time.

Besides these criminal markets and actors, however, there is another variable that compounds Ecuador's crisis: the weakening of the resilience of the state to deal effectively with organized crime. In the Index, Ecuador scored an average of 4.88 out of 10 for resilience, and its score declined since the previous version. Of the countries where the gap between resilience and crime has widened the most, Ecuador is second highest, surpassed only by Myanmar (Figure 2).

The declining capacity of the Ecuadorian state to control its territory is seen in how criminal organizations have come to control locations and infrastructure around the country. As explained above, Ecuador's prisons are a site where organized crime activity breeds and flares up. Violence, including massacres, has escalated since 2018 inside the country's jails and the current crisis erupted after several gang leaders escaped from prisons.<sup>23</sup>

Another important variable to understand the weakening of resilience in the country is the limited capacity of law enforcement bodies to respond to criminal organizations. The police and armed forces are underprepared, undertrained and ill-equipped to respond to the rapidly changing criminal dynamics in the country. Besides capacity constraints, there are accusations of how organized crime has permeated all levels of the state, as would appear to be confirmed by the results of Operation Metastasis.<sup>24</sup>

The judicial system is also key to understanding Ecuador's declining resilience to organized crime. The judiciary is not meeting the challenge, as evidenced by the fact that less than 9% of homicides are prosecuted,<sup>25</sup> and between 2020 and 2022, just 1.3% of judicial cases prosecuting money laundering ended with sentences.<sup>26</sup>

In conclusion, recent events in Ecuador should be seen as the latest symptoms of a security situation that has been deteriorating for some time, but particularly over the last three years or so. Perhaps the current crisis should not have come as a surprise. After all, this inexorable slide towards criminal governance in the country is measurable and predictable using data that we have: the statistics that inform the Global Organized Crime Index record a marked pattern of deterioration in Ecuador's criminality situation and at the same time declining resilience levels.

The violent and transnational nature of organized crime, seen in the cocaine transit trade in Ecuador and the foreign criminal actors behind it, is central to understanding how criminality has become so pervasive, and explains how the current violence spilling onto the streets has come about as a result of networks' competition for a share of this huge, lucrative, destructive criminal economy.

The situation in Ecuador is complex and changing fast. This analysis provides but an initial understanding of the background. A more comprehensive assessment of how intersecting criminal markets, like arms trafficking and extortion, operate in the country, as well as a detailed mapping of the foreign and local criminal actors behind them, will be essential for the Ecuadorian authorities and other stakeholders in formulating sustainable, practicable responses to Ecuador's crisis.





## NOTES

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